

POLICE CHIEF

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

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BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Youth Engagement in “At-Opportunity” Communities

Photos courtesy of Norfolk Police Department.



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ON FEBRUARY 1, 2017, A HEADLINE READ, “GANGS, GUNS AND RAP VIDEOS HELPED MAKE 2016 NORFOLK’S DEADLIEST YEAR IN A DECADE.” The article depicted a photograph of three African American youth holding a firearm—two of those young men were killed due to gun violence. The photograph and the far-too-early loss of life would serve as a catalyst for Norfolk, Virginia, Police Department’s approach to addressing youth gangs, crime, and authentic community engagement. In the years since that headline, the Norfolk Police Department, known as the 2019 CBS National Lip Sync to the Rescue Champions for their rendition of Bruno Mars’s “Uptown Funk,” has been nationally and internationally recognized for more than 20 community engagement programs that reach community



*“The me I see is
the me I’ll be.”*

members of all ages—including youth in high-risk neighborhoods (at-opportunity communities). Norfolk’s Sergeant William Pickering and Ms. Karen Parker-Chesson are among key departmental staff who, along with community stakeholders, play a major role in the success of the agency’s community outreach efforts.

The Norfolk Police Department has been intentional in trying to reach the youth from Norfolk’s “at-opportunity” communities to positively impact the trajectory of youths’ personal development to become future leaders. Youth who participate in community programs benefit from the positive relationships with additional trustworthy, supportive adults facilitated by these programs, which research shows to be associated with improvements in social and emotional development. In partnership with the community and its youth, the Norfolk Police Department strives to be the incubator of authentic youth engagement and its nexus to crime reduction.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Police Leadership Unveils Success (PLUS) Program—Literacy and Mentoring

An empowered life starts with the ability to read. The research is abundantly clear that, children who can read by the end of third grade are four times more likely to graduate from high school. In addition, two out of three students who cannot read well by the end of third grade face grim futures, including incarceration or living on public assistance. Reading and comprehension skills must be developed and reinforced at a young age to ensure that children have the foundational tools needed to reach their full potential in life.

To encourage literacy in Norfolk, the Norfolk Police Department, in conjunction with the Life Enrichment Center (LEC) and Norfolk Public Schools (NPS), is going into its sixth year as

AT-OPPORTUNITY COMMUNITIES

Norfolk Police Chief Boone refers to “at-risk” communities as “at-opportunity” communities, reflecting the agency’s understanding that those communities are often labeled with negative connotations because of lifestyle conditions that foster crime and lead to few economic opportunities, low educational achievements, and no hope.

Chief Boone and the Norfolk Police Department, instead, view these communities as opportunities to make a difference by improving and building long-lasting relationships through authentic community engagement. As Chief Boone points out, “If you’re not authentic, people know it before you say anything. Crime suppression is necessary but it’s not everything. A genuine interest in the lives [of those] you protect is where we begin.”

partners in the PLUS (Police Leadership Unveils Success) program. More than 50 Norfolk police officers and professional staff members serve as literacy mentors and tutors at Norfolk public elementary schools with high concentrations of students from low-income families. The volunteers commit to one hour per week during the school calendar year. Teachers and administrators are thrilled to welcome these dedicated personnel into the schools, and students are responsive to the special attention given to them by officers and staff. This partnership creates an environment where children from at-opportunity communities and the police who serve these neighborhoods can develop and cultivate trusting relationships. These relationships extend far beyond the classroom, impacting not only the students but also their neighborhoods and families. The students receive educational benefits as well—90 percent of the children tutored by the Norfolk Police Department saw improvement in their reading test scores by the end of the academic year.

Each week, 20 Norfolk officers teach children at two elementary schools how to play chess.



Scholastic Chess for Success Program

Tutors from the Norfolk Police Department PLUS program have impacted hundreds of children in Hampton Roads. However, one hour a week to help with tutoring was not enough, so Norfolk Police Department Sergeant David Benjamin decided to implement a scholastic chess program to teach children how to play chess. In addition to the 50 officers tutoring, 20 officers serve in the chess program at two elementary schools one day a week. Numerous studies have demonstrated that scholastic chess instruction can significantly increase English and math test scores, build long-term friendships among students, and teach valuable skills such as problem-solving, analytical thinking, and good sportsmanship. In addition, Sergeant Benjamin hopes that the experience will help to build lasting, positive relationships between the Norfolk Police Department and the community it serves. The chess program is open to any student who shows interest, and playing chess allows students and officers to interact while developing the students’ logic and strategic thinking skills. Additionally, research suggests chess can improve academic performance. In 2000, a study found that students who received chess instruction scored significantly higher on all measures of academic achievement, including math, spatial analysis, and nonverbal reasoning.

Five-O and FADES Program

Historically, barbershops have been a social sanctuary in the black community and a place where various topics are discussed, including police relations. In 2017, the Norfolk Police Department partnered with local barbers in the community to create the Five-O and Fades program. The biweekly engagement project, with the barber-shops as the backdrop, allows barbers to foster friendly and difficult conversations between their male clients and Norfolk police officers. Initially, conversations were fueled by local or national incidents involving police. Those conversations now cover a range of topics, such as sports, cars, and family because of the established trust developed through difficult conversations. Karon Potter, a 15-year-old high school student, has been going to Dr. Deon’s barbershop for four years. In March, he said he saw police there and thought “it was cool.”

I think it’s a good idea because there does need to be a change in the community to make it better. Nowadays [kids] around my age or younger, they’re playing with guns and smoking weed. Things need to change.

As the program continued, the partnership decided to take this positive synergy outside the



More than 600 youths participate in the annual Five-0 and Fades engagement event.

walls of the barbershop to the community. The discussion led to the creation of the annual Five-0 and Fades back-to-school event. The event brings more than 600 youths and their families together to engage with barbers and police officers in a block party atmosphere. Each youth receives a free haircut, backpack, and educational information about making life choices. The goal is to provide youth with a fresh start to the school year to improve their self-esteem for learning. “I’m grateful our officers and community partners are intentional about sharing resources that will make a difference in the lives of our youth,” said Chief Boone. “We don’t just give kids a backpack and a pat on the back and say, ‘Good luck’—we are far more invested than that.”

Norfolk’s Police COPsicle Truck “Cooling” Hot Spots

The indisputable sound of an ice cream truck is sweet music to the ears of children. Imagine their surprise when they discover the ice cream truck is the Norfolk Police Department’s COPsicle truck serving the community in a sweet new way: offering free ice cream to youth throughout the city. The COPsicle truck, whose purchase was sponsored by the Norfolk Police Foundation, is the first ice cream truck fully operated and owned by a law enforcement agency in Virginia. “It’s important that our officers’ outreach programs touch the hearts and minds with emotion,” said Chief Boone. “Now, we’re touching the appetite with ice cream, and I have yet to know anyone who doesn’t enjoy ice cream!” Long-time criminal justice professor Brian Payne called the idea “brilliant.”

These initiatives are actually quite central to what policing is. Enforcing the law is really just one part of what police officers do. There’s also maintaining

order and serving the community and it’s these types of activities that show police are part of the community and not apart from the community.

Through programs like this, the public see and interact with the officers more, encouraging them to speak up in the future before a crime occurs. Additionally, research shows that the presence of police officers in a community will make potential offenders reconsider their behavior.

Cops and Curls

Since 2016, officers have donned their best dress blues and highly glossed shoes for Norfolk Police Department’s annual Cops and Curls event, designed to encourage, motivate, and lift the self-esteem of girls ages 6–13 from at-opportunity communities. The young ladies get to dress up, walk the red carpet, dance to music, and participate in different educational activities. The Norfolk Police Department believes the event helps build bridges in the community and gives the young girls a chance to see police in a different light. In addition, officers engage in fun and fellowship with the girls, taking part in manicures, dancing, games, and a photo booth. Captain Michele Naughton, the first African American female to be promoted to captain at Norfolk Police Department, said,

The event is an important way to build self-esteem in young women. The young boys are doing sports, and you recognize that women and young girls are

Officers engage in fun and fellowship with young girls during the annual Cops and Curls event.



“The public see and interact with the officers more, encouraging them to speak up in the future before a crime occurs.”

very important to our society. If we don't push their esteem before they get to those teenage years, they could be pulled either way.

The agency hopes the event builds positive relationships between community members and the police and helps young women see the best in themselves. “You can give time, you can give money, but when you reach someone and you touch their heart, that’s magical,” Chief Boone said.

Teaching, Reaching, Understanding and Educating (T.R.U.E.) Youth Program

The Norfolk Police Department partnered with Norfolk Public Schools to start the T.R.U.E. (teaching, reaching, understanding, and educating) youth program in 2017. This initiative, created by officers, aims to empower Norfolk public high school students in getting ready for the workforce by providing them with tools for educational or employment success. The six-week program teaches youth how to write a résumé, prepare for job interviews, and complete college or trade school applications, as well as providing professional dress coaching and introductions to potential employers and military recruiters. The

program rotates among high schools throughout Norfolk. In addition to preparing students for life beyond high school, the program has helped form positive relationships between students and officers and provided a means to improve the students’ confidence to take ownership of their future endeavors. High school junior Sherry Durham says it works. She was in need of a job, and officers helped her fill out applications. Within two weeks, she landed a job at a finance company.

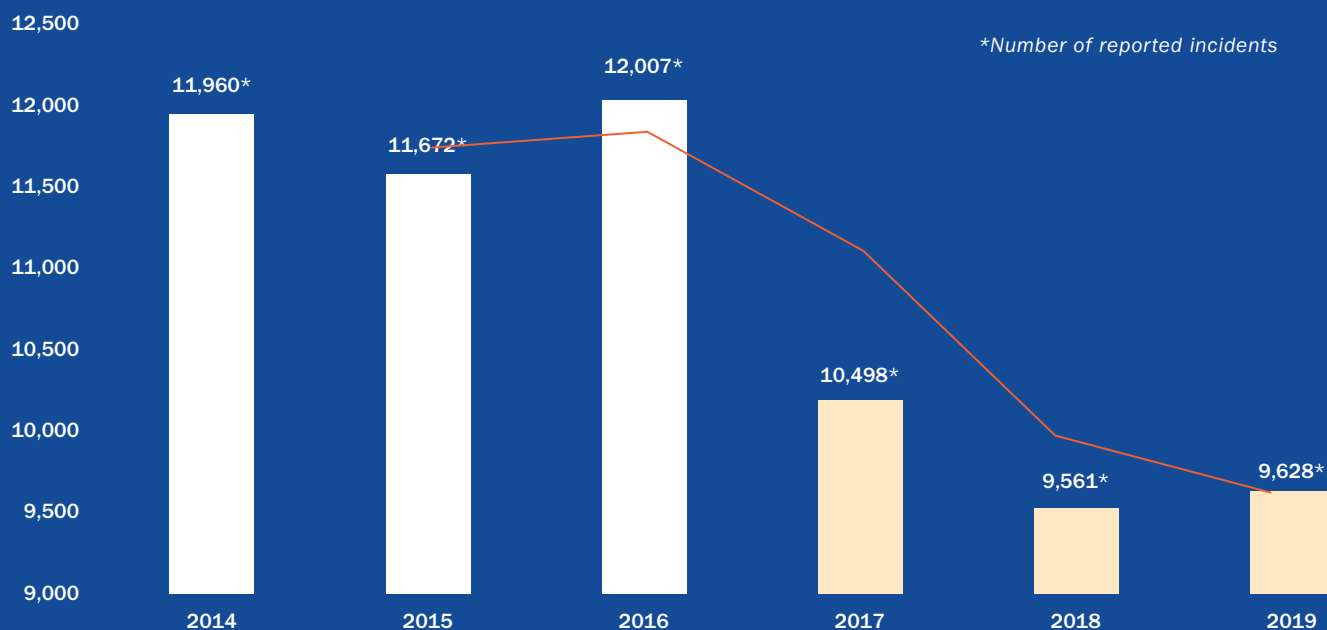
Cops and Kids Eating (CAKE)

CAKE (Cops and Kids Eating) is a partnership with the Boys and Girls Club of Southeastern Virginia. Once a month, officers share an after-school meal with youths who are also treated to a variety of

CAKE brings together officers and youths for an after-school meal each month.



FIGURE 1: NORFOLK POLICE DEPARTMENT SIX-YEAR CRIME TREND



static police displays and classroom discussions on topics such as the K9 Unit, Homeland Security Division's bomb robot, the Forensic Unit, Beach Patrol, and Gang Unit. This initiative is effective in brokering mutual trust and helping youth view the police as their friends and mentors. In addition, after-school engagement programs have been shown to positively impact academic achievement.

THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – CRIME SUPPRESSION NEXUS

The Norfolk Police Department's philosophy in crime suppression is entrenched in building social capital with its communities in order to effectively address crime. If a lack of trust between police and the community exists, it will limit their ability to work together to prevent crime. Conversely, strong relationships between police and communities provide the foundation for effective crime prevention. The Norfolk Police Department believes in "actionable partnerships" that measurably impact crime, particularly crime committed by youth. Research suggests that the effectiveness of community engagement can be difficult to measure as it relates to crime reduction. However, the Norfolk Police Department views authentic community outreach as an opportunity to be transparent and a way to show the community it cares. These events allow officers to make a personal connection with Norfolk residents so that the community supports evidence-based solutions to fighting crime.

CONCLUSION

The Norfolk Police Department has realized significant crime reductions since elevating their community youth engagement initiatives. Chief Boone attributes the decrease in crime to both the hard work of the officers and agency staff and the diligent support of community members. The agency has worked hard to implement community outreach, authentically integrate into the neighborhoods served, and touch the hearts and minds of community members. Balancing community engagement and crime reduction can be difficult; nonetheless, the Norfolk Police Department believes these many youth programs and initiatives are making all the difference—and Norfolk's lowest crime rate in 35 years of data supports this belief. ♡

IACP RESOURCES

- Youth-Focused Policing Agency Self-Assessment Tool
- Improving Law Enforcement Responses to Adolescent Girls

theIACP.org

- The Direct Relationship of Mentoring, Positive Intervention, and Enhancing Youth-Police Engagement (article)

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